Transcript: Patricia Grant

Save Your Oakland Stories

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IMAGES:

INTERVIEWER (Elena Botkin-Levy)
So today is October 14th, 2023. We're recording at the Oakland Main Library for Save Your Oakland Stories. I'm Elena Botkin-Levy from Gems Oral Histories. And today I'm recording with Patricia Grant. So I'm going to have you introduce yourself, your name, your age, and when and where you were born.

PATRICIA GRANT
Thank you, Elena. I'm known as Keka. That is a nickname for Patricia Angelica. I was born in Chile in the year of 1974, so I'm 48 years old. I consider myself not a native, but I love Oakland for various reasons. Somehow my journey has been a tough journey. I came to this country about 28 years ago looking for my biological father. In that journey, I ended up in Philadelphia, where I had two home invasions and life was really rough. So at one point my ex (at that time girlfriend) suggested "why don't we move back to the West Coast?" I used to live with her in Seattle and somehow we made the decision to move back to the West Coast. But the question was where in the West Coast? We didn't want to be in Seattle already. Seattle had been depressing. There were issues that I just didn't want to be in a city that didn't bring much of life inside of me, she said, "Let's go to the Bay Area." And I remember saying "the Bay Area, what is there?" She's like, "you know what? It reminded me of Chile. I think you're going to love this place. It has the wineries, it has the beaches, you have the desert." I'm like, "really? So, all in one place?" "Not all in one place, but different counties, different areas, and we can explore. There's also a large community of Latino people. There's more diversity. I need Blackness. I need my Black people." And although we were in Philadelphia, we're in the East Coast. We always felt like outsiders. I was never, like, welcomed in there. So with all plans in mind, the year was 2007, and I came here from Seattle, and I chose the month of October. I always remember because it was the day before Halloween I decided to do a prank, I'm much of a jokester. So I decided to hop on the Amtrak without even telling nobody, I packed seven pieces of suitcases. Out of the seven pieces, I will say three or four of them were like suitcases. The other ones were just boxes. I always remember hopping in the train and saying goodbye like, almost like a little kid, like, "bye bye Seattle. I'm done with y'all passive aggressive."

But once on the train I had a wonderful conversation with someone. I never run into again, of course. And he was a lady who was escaping domestic violence. And she said, you know, "I just hopped in here with my five kids, and I'm going to Stockton." I never heard of Stockton. And I was like, "I'm going to Oakland, never heard of Oakland, but I'm going there. I have nobody." And she said, "what do you mean you have nobody?" I'm like, "that's just the way I am." She's like, "you know what? I was scared to do this. It took me 15 or 16 years, which is the oldest son. But I'm going to the Bay Area, just like you." And I said "OK." And we both kind of, like, made instant friends, but also supportive bond between this Latina woman and her five kids.

And once I land in Oakland, I honestly, I really just like the different landscape. There were some areas that they reminded me of Chile, but then I saw more Latinos, more Blackness. I remember going to my first all lesbian party right around the corner here from the library in a place called Butter. That was the gem. I remember my… I think I landed on Friday and that party was a Sunday party and I felt like Charlie Wonka, pretty much. I was like, Oh my gosh, all types of chocolate. Like, oh my God, all my sisters

beautiful color skins, everybody of all shapes and sizes and and personalities and joy all around before even the word “Black joy” existed. Or yeah, it wasn't plans, but, and…

Fast forward to that, I got to be honest, I was very lucky to find a job. I bilingual, I have my degree. I studied psychology in my native country in Chile. But when I got here I had no problem finding a job. I always been in the field of corporations. I don't know why, although I consider myself to be much more on the liberal side. But hey, I need that money just like everybody else. But the point that I wanted to say is that it took me less than two days to find a job. I got a job interview and they asked me, can you come back next day to start immediately. So finding a job was not a problem and I was happy, but I was staying at just hotels. Cheap hotels that you pay by the week. If anybody remembers, at one point there was the Travelers Hotels and the Jefferson Hotels, and it always stayed in my mind because it was packed with Black people who were in vulnerable positions or in desperate times or both. And from then on I just took it. I finally got my first apartment in the edge of West Oakland and downtown Oakland, where I've been living for 16 years.

I'm an artist. I do folk art and this space was perfect for someone who doesn't have a car or loves to walk like I do. And it's close enough to the lake. It's 15 minute walk. 16 years passed and I realized, although I love my place and it's this beautiful, like, type of Brooklyn brownstone, kind of like old building. The safety concern, the fact that I am living in an area that is a Skid Row and it reminded me a lot of like areas that are very, you know, just abandoned by the rest of the city, in this case. I had put myself on names on the waiting list for several housing places. And I'm happy to say today that after 10 years of being on the waiting list, they called me from a place in July and it was one day after my mom had been run by a car. She suffered hit and run. It now sounds really dramatic, this story, but it is truth. I got a call from a housing place one day after my mom's accident. So when people say accidents happen for a reason or there's a blessing out of it, well, this is said because I never thought they were going to call me. And I had to go through a lot of hurdles and a lot of barriers and paperwork from July until now, when they finally approved me. I think that there was some discouragement in some ends, in some instances, and they thought that I was going to give up. I had to endure a lot of institutionalized racism and prejudice and mostly by white Latinos. And I'm the type that I persevered. I am Latina myself, and I know how to kill you with kindness. I think there are many people saw me that, or thought that I was going to give up or throw the towel, and I never did. I'm happy to share this story in front of you. This is the most happiest day of my life living in Oakland. I see Oakland at the farmers market this morning in a different lens. Sitting in one corner with my mom enjoying a coffee and a nice vegan pastry, when I can finally say I am an Oaklander, or Wakanda, local lover, or whatever name you want to put or title in there, I can finally say I find my home. And that home is Oakland.

INTERVIEWER
Thank you for sharing. That’s an exciting day. When you say that you feel like an Oaklander, what does that mean to you?

PATRICIA GRANT

It's almost like I'm finally realizing like this is how people live. I felt like many times, there was a lot of struggle, a lot of problems, and I was not seeing life in colors. I was not seeing, being able to breathe or feel my diversity as the way I wanted to feel in other cities. And so that's the feeling of feeling included, part of a group, and I definitely do have some commonalities with many folks here. I have created roots with the queer art groups, and with some other oddballs. Yes.

INTERVIEWER
Nice. You said that Oakland reminds you of home, or home in Chile I mean, say more about that.

PATRICIA GRANT
Oh my God, Shall we start with Napa and Sonoma? Shall we start with the alcohol right away? Let's see. Reminds me of just, not only the landscape, but also figuratively speaking: the political action here behind, from the 70s on, has been the home from Chilean exiles coming from the dictatorship of Pinochet. A city that's always been involved with political causes, which it was something that I really saw in Chile growing up. So it's not just the landscape, but I think it's just the people's mentalities, people's ways. We're also much more, like, easygoing, more flex, more flexible, not so rigid as opposed to other states. Like I lived in the South and the East Coast, like I said, where everything is just very, like rigid for me, perhaps.

INTERVIEWER
And you said before you moved here, you didn't really know… you didn't really know what to expect of the city. So when you first arrived here, what year was that and can you describe what it looked and felt like?

PATRICIA GRANT
So the year I first arrived, it was 2007. And what it felt once I land… I mean, once I got here from Amtrak… it felt like I have moved to another country, but not quite Mexico, but like the rich version of Mexico. I don't know if I could say that. Yeah, yeah. It felt like I was still in United States, yet almost with like a path of Latin America. It was like, I really thought I was cosmopolitan in that sense. I saw different… When they called diversity, I saw that beautiful array of diversity here. So yes.

INTERVIEWER
And it sounds like there's been a couple key locations that tell your Oakland story. It sounds like the Butter party was one. Tell me more about that.

PATRICIA GRANT
OK, OMG the Butter Party. I think it was interesting, especially if you're going through a break up. Back then this is a place that, it was a nightclub. I believe it was hosted by one event maker of that time. I forgot her name. I'm horrible with names. But it was supported by the owner of the establishment who also happened to own the restaurant was called Oasis. So they provided the food, so it was not just... And the lovely thing was during the daytime, so you can go there early, you know, get there at 2:00 PM and it lasted around 8:00-ish or 9. And it was amazing. I've seen a room of more than 500 Black women

or women of all colors and sizes. Like I said, it was paradise for me. I also felt like it brought a sense of community. Many of us, maybe, were not drinking or dancing, but we were connecting with one another or just getting to know each other. And this was an era that was very important, where it was like the beginning of Queer As Folk in the beginning of L Word or whatnot? Apps were in their early stages, so exchanging numbers and texting was a new thing. And so I think it was like the first for… steps or stones for people that later on the LGBT community can do more parties and extend themselves in different ramifications per se.

INTERVIEWER
I used to love Butter.

PATRICIA GRANT
See, I know. Your face lit up when I mentioned it, I was like, oh, OK, I hit that one. Yes, yes, yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER
Where? What are other locations that you remember going to or experiencing when you first got to Oakland that were significant?

PATRICIA GRANT
Another place I really like, of course, was the Lake. I think to me the Lake was the most impressive part, that… being introduced to the Lake at night versus daytime. It brought a little romantic touch and I felt like, again, I felt like I was in another country. But this time more like Mediterranean, or Frenchy, or Italian flavors in it. Don't ask me why, or the lighting, or the way that it was designed. It's a beautiful walk around the Lake. You feel the peace, but you also feel the embrace. And I find that this body of water in particular, I come from a city in Chile where I actually grew up next to the ocean. But having a body of water like a lake where you see not only all types of different people, I think it brings kind of a holistic aspect to it as a community and as a city. I find it to be also like a place for healing, great for healing and more so if you go for a nice walk in the morning. I mean, that's just my suggestion, but I… the charms of the lake is that it doesn't discriminate. It invites all of us. And I think that's the staple of Oakland, and I love it.

INTERVIEWER
I wonder, you moved here in 2007, and so that's been a number of years that you've lived here in Oakland. What kind of changes have you noticed or yeah, what's? What's different today than when you first moved here?

PATRICIA GRANT
What is different today, and it kind of saddens me in a way, is the disappearance of Black people. I only get to see my Black people display on big murals, or perhaps photographs, that you see now on Broadway along the side strip on Telegraph as well. But the actual existence of my dear Black and brown, but mostly Black, I will say… it has had an, a kind of an effect for me because he he has become a city that's been gentrified but also perhaps gentrified with the type of whites or type of people that maybe

some of us do not want to be encountered. So that's the only downsides for me. I do miss the Blackness that I experienced back then as to what it is now. And one thing that I do like that it has changed now, I see it that we go by trends, is the possibility and flexibility or openness of people of trying different foods, especially for those who are foodies or like try different experiences outside of what they were raised or accustomed. And I see it especially here. This city brings a lot of opportunities for people in the food industry. If you want to do your pop up… and I love that, I love seeing how it has developed in different hubs around… not just San Francisco, but the Bay. There's a pop up branch here, now there's a high… a lot of folks are highlighting like Filipino food or whatnot. So call it trend or not, I do like that fact that, it almost like everybody gets their time. The time to shine, yeah.

INTERVIEWER
Do you remember some of the first places you ate at when you came here?

PATRICIA GRANT
OMG. OK, Yes, of course. And dear departed Le Cheval. Le Cheval was my first place I ate. I was invited there by a dear friend who's an Oakland native, and a librarian like yourself. So I also, they… I gotta mention my second or third most beloved place I like of Oakland is the Oakland Library. I am one of those who order a lot of books from you guys, a lot of materials and CDs. I have never felt judged by none of the people who work here. I also have attended a couple of workshops or classes. I would love to work for the library, but that's another subject. Yes, I also think that it brings a place of support, a slash holistic or perhaps learning curve side for many of us. So I do appreciate the library and the building, I love it. And it's close to the Lake. So what can you like? What can you not like? Like everything.

INTERVIEWER
Nice. When you think about, now that you're calling yourself an Oaklander, which you claimed, what does that mean for you? And what are your hopes for the future, for yourself, and for the city?

PATRICIA GRANT
What does it mean? It means that currently… I have exhibited in Mexico and I'm also, like, showing my work in Germany and perhaps this plane elsewhere. Doesn't matter the city or the country, and I would love to take the name of Oakland with me. I think that other people are interested, and they like to hear those experiences or what it is to live here, coming from a person of color. Or perhaps what we have gone through or have created. Whether I participated in murals, whether I did an exhibit here, but also as a community, How do people of Oakland live? What do you do in your day off? Or what do we do here on the weekends? Or what is the marathon going on? And I'm the type that I like to explain. I like to engage people, and I like to tell them, and sometimes correct them too, if I have to. But yeah, I can't stop it. OK.

INTERVIEWER
I just lost my question. Oh, you said you display work. What kind of work?

PATRICIA GRANT

So I do... I'm a folk artist, or nomad artist as they call it, or outsider. So I'm mostly, like, influenced by Romare Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. Those are my favorite painters. OK, another thing, I can think of it right now, one thing I love about Oakland: the museum. The Oakland museum is a plus. Please, please. And now that it got renovated, please, people, if you haven't gone there, you have to go. It's beautiful. And even if you do like a little picnic for your family, I love that it's welcoming of all ages so everybody can do their own thing. But parenthesis… back to my art is… mostly I like to display or work on the idea of Black women's isolation with, when it comes to themes around self-care and rest as a resistance and anything about mental health. And also, like, but also like, futurism in the Black community or people of color. But my work is mostly, like, colorful stuff in that end.

INTERVIEWER
Can you describe it a little bit?

PATRICIA GRANT
Colorful. Colorful and funky, yes.

INTERVIEWER
And paintings?

PATRICIA GRANT
Paintings. Medium, acrylic. Acrylic, watercolors, and gouache.

INTERVIEWER
Are you about to show a picture? Can you choose one and describe it?

PATRICIA GRANT
That is my brother Eric. He recently moved to… actually he moved to Seattle, although we met in Seattle and he lived in Oakland for 15 or something years, and he was a caregiver of his mom. And I like to play with the idea of the American flag and what it has inflicted on Black bodies. I like to also see, at the future, what are we seeing besides erections and, like, buildings and so much, like, noise pollution? And then ideas of the bodies, but it comes outside of your organs, and emotions that have been hold… or perhaps haven't been purged from your organs. So I like to play a lot with that idea, as you can see.

INTERVIEWER
Thank you. And your artist name?

PATRICIA GRANT
My artist name is Keka Grant.

INTERVIEWER

Very cool. As we think about your Oakland story, does it feel like there's anything missing from our conversation today? This is just a snapshot. But anything that feels really important to share today as part of your story?

PATRICIA GRANT
What I wanted to share is that now I can finally say don't ever give up, whether it's your career, your loved one, whatever goal you have then. And I never thought that I will find myself waiting 10 years, let alone then deal with a lot of, like, barriers and just plain racism. But I did it. So I think that the message, or what I would like to share beyond this, don't ever give up whatever your dream is.

INTERVIEWER
Nice. Well, thank you. Thanks for sharing your story.

PATRICIA GRANT
Thank you!